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Contemporary girlhood: Maternal reports on sexualized behaviour and appearance concern in
4-10 year-old girls

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that the sexualization of girls has increased markedly over time. The overall aim of the present study was to offer a description of the behaviours of young girls, with a particular focus on potentially sexualized behaviours and appearance concern. A sample of 815 mothers of 4-10 year-old girls completed a questionnaire about a range of behaviours exhibited by their daughters, in addition to measures of their own self-objectification and material concern. It was found that many girls engaged with teen culture and used a variety of beauty products, but few exhibited more overtly sexualized behaviours. Involvement with teen culture, using beauty products, attention to clothes, and personal grooming were all associated with the measure of appearance concern, as were maternal self-objectification and material concern. It was concluded that young girls do engage in 'grown up' behaviours and that such engagement is not benign for their development.

Key words: appearance concern; sexualization; girls; teen culture; self-objectification

Contemporary Girlhood: Maternal Reports on Sexualized Behaviour and Appearance Concern in 4-10 year-old Girls

There is no doubt that women's bodies in western societies are subject to a high degree of objectification and sexualization, as evident from the visual representation of women in the mass media. One particularly insidious consequence is what has been termed self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This refers to the process whereby women and girls are gradually socialized to adopt an observer's perspective on their physical self and so come to view *themselves* as primarily an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance. A considerable body of research has now demonstrated that self-objectification and the accompanying habitual monitoring of external appearance have a range of negative consequences for women, including increased shame and anxiety about the body, disordered eating, depressed mood, and low sexual functioning (for a review, see Tiggemann, 2011).

To the extent that sexual objectification forms part of women's daily experience, it also then forms part of the sociocultural context into which adolescent and younger girls grow. More concerning still is the documented increase in the sexualization of girlhood. For example, the *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (2007) presented clear evidence that the objectification and sexualization of young women and girls has increased over time, as indicated by the content of mainstream teen magazines, music videos and music lyrics, and by the trend towards provocatively dressed dolls and sexy clothing marketed to younger girls. More recently, Graff, Murnen, and Krause (2013) documented a substantial increase across three decades in sexualizing characteristics, e.g., low-cut tops that emphasize the breasts, in the images portrayed in the magazines *Seventeen* and *Girls' Life*. However, to date, there is little research that investigates the behavioural or other consequences of young girls growing up in this changing cultural environment.

There are, however, an increasing number of popular or anecdotal accounts of 10 year-old (or even 8 year-old) girls wearing sexually provocative clothing, padded bras, and make-up, and in other ways striving to look “sexy” or “hot” (e.g., Durham, 2008; Hamilton, 2008; Reist, 2009). Certainly advertisers have targeted the “tween” market (usually defined as between 8 and 12 years of age, although sometimes starting as young as 6), in an attempt to use “pester-power” (the power children exert through repeated nagging) to influence the purchasing decisions of parents. As yet there is no empirical basis for these anecdotal accounts. Thus the present study aims to document via maternal report the frequency of a range of behaviours, including those that could be viewed as potentially sexualized or too grown up, in a large sample of young girls. In this way it seeks to present a picture of contemporary girlhood.

At the societal level, there is considerable public debate as to whether or not the expression of “sexualized” behaviours (e.g., wearing high heels or make-up) among young girls is actually problematic. On the one hand, it is argued that little girls have always dressed up and played at being grown up and thus there is no harm. On the other hand, others (e.g., Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013) argue that sexualized attitudes and behaviours have negative consequences for both the girl (in instilling a particular self-objectified perspective of herself), and for the broader society (for example, in contributing to the acceptability of child pornography). Thus research needs to investigate whether or not the expression of sexualized behaviour has negative implications for young girls’ development and well-being. The present study addresses one particular facet, namely body image.

Although widespread body dissatisfaction has been well documented in adult women and adolescent girls, there is growing evidence that such appearance and body concerns are also relevant to younger girls (Tiggemann, 2013). For example, in their review of girls’ body image, Wertheim, Paxton, and Blaney (2009) reported estimates of between 40 and 50 per

cent for the number of pre-adolescent girls wishing to be thinner. Although most of the studies have sampled girls aged 9 years and above, some research indicates that weight concerns arise earlier, around 5 to 6 years of age (Davison, Markey, & Birch, 2000, 2003; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2005, 2006a). Furthermore, as is the case with adult and adolescent women, pre-adolescent body dissatisfaction has been implicated as a precursor for subsequent dieting and disordered eating, as well as poorer psychological well-being (Smolak & Thompson, 2009; Wertheim et al., 2009).

Although all girls are subject to many sociocultural influences, parental attitudes and behaviours are likely to be particularly influential for younger girls (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Indeed, the expression of many grown up behaviours such as wearing make-up or high heels likely requires active parental involvement, minimally in the form of financial resources. Other research has indicated that daughters' body dissatisfaction and dieting practices correlate with those of their mothers, for both adolescent (e.g., van den Berg, Keery, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010) and younger girls (Anschutz, Kanfers, van Strien, Vermulst, & Engels, 2009; Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003). Similarly, one study has shown a positive correlation between mothers' and (college-age) daughters' level of self-objectification (McKinley, 1999). The present study sought to investigate whether mothers' own self-objectification would likewise be translated into the expression of particular 'sexualized' behaviours in their younger daughters. In addition, mothers' level of material concern for their daughters was investigated. In attempting to do their best for their children, some parents may strive to provide them with all the 'latest' material things. As desirable consumer goods have been linked to the search for the 'body perfect' (Dittmar, 2008), such a wish may inadvertently contribute to increased appearance concern.

In sum, the overarching goal of the present study was to begin the investigation of 'grown up' or potentially sexualized behaviours among young girls. The first specific aim

was to document the frequency of a broad range of behaviours, including potentially sexualized behaviours, in 4-10 year-old girls as reported by their mothers. The second aim was to determine the relationships between these behaviours and appearance concern. The final aim was to investigate the role of maternal attributes. In particular, it was predicted that mothers' self-objectification and material concern would be positively correlated with sexualized behaviour and appearance concern displayed by their daughters.

Method

Participants

Participants were 815 women who were the mothers of 4-10 year-old girls. Mothers were aged between 22 and 53 years, with a mean age of 37.44 years ($SD = 5.12$). Most of them (86.4%) had at least one other child, with the mean number of children being 2.33 ($SD = 0.91$). Mothers' mean BMI was 26.62 ($SD = 6.12$), which falls into the slightly overweight range (Garrow & Webster, 1985). About a third of the participants (32.2%) had completed an undergraduate degree and a third (36.4%) some sort of graduate study. They overwhelmingly (94.2%) identified as Caucasian/White (0.5% Aboriginal, 2.0% Asian, 0.1% African, 3.2% other).

Materials

The questionnaire was developed for the current study and delivered online. In order to achieve a good response, it was designed to be relatively brief and straight-forward. The initial section asked mothers to report on their daughter, and the second section asked mothers questions about themselves. Demographic information collected was child age and information about siblings, and maternal age, height, weight, highest level of education, and ethnic background. At the end of the questionnaire participants were invited to make further comments.

Child behaviours. Participants were presented with a list of 26 behaviours and asked to rate the frequency with which their daughter engaged in each behaviour on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*). These behaviours covered a wide range of domains. In particular, they included a number of ‘grown up’ or potentially sexualized behaviours, e.g., wears shoes with high heels, wears make up, watches music videos, is interested in fashion and what clothes are ‘in.’ As we wished to obtain a picture of girls’ overall behaviour, the list also included age-appropriate (clearly non-sexualized) behaviours like art and craft, reading, and helping with chores. The complete list of behaviours can be seen in Table 1.

The list of potentially sexualized behaviours was developed on the basis of three focus groups conducted with 17 mothers of 4-10 year-old girls. In these groups mothers were asked their opinions on the issue of ‘growing up too quickly’ and were asked to identify particular behaviours in their daughters that illustrated the concept. They were able to provide numerous examples that provided the basis for the current list.

Child appearance concern. Daughters’ appearance concerns were similarly assessed by mothers’ reports on the frequency of seven items addressing the importance of appearance and associated problems. Exemplar items are: ‘Asks for feedback on her appearance (e.g., “Does this look good on me?”, “Do I look pretty?”);’ ‘Appears satisfied or comfortable with her body’ (reverse-coded); and ‘Expresses concern about her appearance (e.g., “I don’t like my hair/nose/bottom”, “I am not pretty”).’ These items and associated examples were also developed on the basis of the focus group comments. Responses were made in the same response format (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*). Scores were summed to produce a scale ranging from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater concern with appearance. Internal reliability for this newly-constructed scale was adequate ($\alpha = .76$).

Maternal self-objectification. Mothers' self-objectification was assessed by the two most-commonly used measures in the literature (Calogero, 2010). First, participants completed the Self-Objectification Questionnaire of Noll and Fredrickson (1998). In this measure respondents rank ten body attributes in order of how important each attribute is to their physical self-concept. Five of the attributes are appearance based (*weight, sex appeal, physical attractiveness, firm/sculpted muscles, and measurements*), whereas the other five are competency based (*physical coordination, health, strength, energy level, and physical fitness level*). Scores are derived by calculating the difference between the sum of the appearance and competence rankings. The potential range of scores is from -25 to +25 with positive scores indicating a greater emphasis on appearance, which is interpreted as greater self-objectification (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998).

The second measure was the Body Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale of McKinley and Hyde (1996). This scale consists of 8 items (e.g., "During the day, I think about how I look many times") to which participants respond on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, through 7 = *strongly agree*). Scores are summed and averaged. High scores represent individuals who frequently monitor their bodies and think of it in terms of how it looks rather than how it feels. In the present sample, reliability was adequate ($\alpha = .83$).

Maternal material concern. Material concern for their daughters was assessed by two questions: "It is important to me that my daughter has the latest 'things' (toys, clothes, etc)" and "It is important to me that my daughter does not have less than other children." These questions were based on the tension expressed by some mothers in the focus groups between not wanting to give their child too many material possessions and yet not wanting their child to be excluded from their peer group for not having what their friends have. Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

As responses to the two questions were positively correlated ($r = .53, p < .001$), they were summed to produce a score ranging from 2 to 10.

Procedure

Following approval by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee, links to the questionnaire were placed on a number of Australian parenting websites (e.g., *Essential Baby*, *Mama Mia*, *Raising Children Network*). Parents of girls aged 4 to 10 years were invited to participate in a study entitled “Raising Girls in a Modern World.” They were asked to complete the questionnaire for one of their daughters in the age range. The actual questionnaire was hosted on a secure website at the University. Although all parents were invited to participate, in practice the overwhelming majority (> 95%) of responses came from mothers. In addition, the self-objectification scales have been designed primarily for women. Thus an additional 21 responses from fathers and 17 individuals who did not identify their gender were not included in the present report.

Results

Child Behaviours

Table 1 provides the percentage of girls who engaged in the specified behaviours at least ‘sometimes’ (scores = 3, 4 or 5). It can be seen that over 80% of girls engaged in behaviours like playing ‘dress ups,’ sport and physical activity, art and craft, dancing, reading, and helping with household chores. Across the whole sample, very few girls (< 10%) engaged in what might be viewed as overtly sexualized behaviours, e.g., wearing a padded bra or clothes with slogans such as ‘hot’ or ‘sexy.’ A sizable number (>30%) did, however, engage in more appearance focused behaviours, including wearing lip gloss and nail polish, and demonstrated an interest in clothes and fashion.

A series of analyses of variance compared the mean scores for three age groups: 4-5 years ($n = 339$), 6-7 years ($n = 209$), and 8-10 years ($n = 267$). From Table 1 it can be seen

that activities like playing ‘dress ups’ decreased with age. On the other hand, 8-10 year-olds were significantly more likely to wear lip gloss, make up, a padded bra, nail polish, and deodorant than their younger counterparts. They were also more likely to curl or straighten their hair, to remove body hair, to engage with teen media (music videos, pop music, magazines), and to be interested in fashion, the latest ‘stuff,’ celebrities, and boys.

In order to investigate the underlying structure of the behaviours and to reduce them to a manageable number for further analyses, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. Following the recommendations of Costello and Osborne (2005), principal axis factoring was selected as the appropriate extraction method for non-normally distributed data. Although seven factors with eigenvalues > 1 were extracted, two of these just met the criterion (< 1.03), and inspection of the scree-plot showed five factors. This was followed by oblique rotation, in which factors are allowed to correlate, as recommended by Costello and Osborne (2005). The resulting factor loadings $> .32$, as recommended by Tabachnik and Fidell (2001), are provided in Table 2.

The first factor (eigenvalue = 5.18) accounted for 19.9% of the variance and contained eight items to do with involvement in teen culture (teen media, fashion, and celebrities). The second factor (eigenvalue = 2.56, 7.4% of variance) contained five items comprising the ‘other’ activities, e.g., reading, crafts. It is interesting that the item “likes to play ‘dress ups’” loaded on this factor. The third factor (eigenvalue = 1.64, 4.1% of variance) contained five items to do with the use of beauty products (make up, nail polish, heeled shoes). The fourth factor (eigenvalue = 1.45, 2.9% of variance) contained three items pertaining to clothes. The final factor (eigenvalue = 1.30, 2.5% of variance) contained three items to do with (adult) personal grooming, e.g., wear deodorant, remove body hair. Only three items did not load on any factor (playing sport, and the lowly endorsed dying of hair and wearing of clothes with slogans); these items were omitted from further analyses.

Five corresponding scale scores were calculated by summing and averaging items that loaded on each factor. The only item to load on more than one factor (interest in fashion and clothes) was added to the Attention to Clothes scale in order to increase its robustness in terms of number of items. Table 2 provides internal reliabilities and mean inter-item correlations for the resulting scales. Although internal reliability was somewhat low for three of the factors, this is not unexpected for scales with so few items. More importantly, the mean inter-item correlations all fell within the .2-.4 range recommended by Briggs and Cheek (1986) as indicative of optimal homogeneity in scales with few items. The age group comparisons confirmed that 8-10 year-olds scored higher on Involvement in Teen Culture, $F(2,803) = 244.34, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .38$, Beauty Products, $F(2,797) = 16.38, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$, Attention to Clothes, $F(2,807) = 16.66, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$, and Personal Grooming, $F(2,804) = 84.70, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .17$, than their younger counterparts. On the other hand, they scored significantly lower on Other Activities, $F(2,794) = 63.18, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .38$.

Appearance Concern

Table 3 indicates that across the whole sample the vast majority of girls (> 95%) appeared satisfied with their bodies and expressed relatively few concerns with their appearance. More than half, however, asked for feedback and made comments on their own and others' appearance. Analyses of variance by age group showed that 8-10 year-old girls appeared significantly less satisfied, expressed more concern with their appearance and how they looked in photographs, examined themselves more in the mirror, but made fewer comments on their own appearance (e.g., "I look pretty") than did their younger counterparts. In particular, fully 28% of 8-10 year-old girls expressed concern with their appearance, and 15% with how they looked in photos. In terms of total scale score, an ANOVA followed by post hoc comparisons confirmed that 8-10 year-olds ($M = 15.91, SD = 4.22$) expressed more appearance concerns than 6-7 year-olds ($M = 15.00, SD = 3.65$), who in turn expressed more

appearance concerns than 4-5 year-old girls ($M = 14.36$, $SD = 3.63$), $F(2,795) = 11.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

Table 4 provides the inter-correlations between the behavioural factors and correlations with appearance concern. Because of the large sample size, only correlations equal to or greater than .10 were considered significant (approximately equivalent to $p = .005$). It can be seen that behaviours surrounding involvement in teen culture, use of beauty products, attention to clothes, and personal grooming were all significantly related to appearance concern. On the other hand, participation in other activities (e.g., reading or craft) was not related.

Relationship with Maternal Attributes

Table 5 shows the relationships between behavioural factors and appearance concern with maternal attributes, in particular mother's age, BMI, self-objectification, self-surveillance, and material concern. It can be seen that maternal age was positively associated with child involvement with teen culture, and negatively associated with other activities. Maternal BMI was associated only with child personal grooming. Maternal self-surveillance (but not self-objectification) was associated with child teen culture involvement and use of beauty products, as well as overall appearance concern in their daughters. However, these relationships were of small effect size. Maternal material concern was a little more strongly related to child teen culture involvement, beauty products, attention to clothes, and appearance concern.

Predictors of Appearance Concern

In order to integrate the findings into one overall framework, a final hierarchical regression analysis was undertaken to predict appearance concern. Child age was entered on Step 1, followed by the maternal variables of age, self-objectification, self-surveillance, and material concern on Step 2 (BMI was omitted because of the large number of missing

values). The child behavioural factors were then entered on Step 3. This resulted in overall significant prediction, $R = .562$, $F(10, 732) = 33.88$, $p < .001$.

As can be seen in Table 6 which presents the resulting standardized regression coefficients for each step, Step 1 (child age) produced significant prediction. As a set, the maternal variables (Step 2) added significant prediction, with self-surveillance and material concern being significant individual predictors. Finally, the child behaviours (Step 3) added further significant prediction. Interestingly, with all predictor variables in the regression equation, only the child behaviours of teen culture engagement, use of beauty products, and attention to clothes emerged as significant individual predictors.

Discussion

The present study has made a start on investigating aspects of an important contemporary social concern, namely the sexualization of young girls, by examining their reported behaviours. The major finding is that some behaviours do appear to cluster together and, at least in terms of body image and appearance concerns, appear to be negatively associated with young girls' well-being.

In general, girls evidenced a number of behaviours that might be considered overly grown up. In particular, they showed considerable engagement with teen culture, including media targeted at older teenage girls, such as music videos and teen magazines. They also expressed an interest in fashion, celebrities like Miley Cyrus and Justin Bieber, and in boys. A number also engaged in beauty behaviours like wearing nail polish and heeled shoes. Not surprisingly, these behaviours were more frequent among 8-10 year olds than younger girls. Indeed, it seemed that with age there was a shift from activities like reading and craft to these more appearance-focused activities. Nevertheless, all of these behaviours might previously have been viewed as the province of adolescent or teenage girls, not 8-10 year-olds. As has been suggested in other accounts (e.g., Tiggemann & Slater, 2014), it is as if contemporary

girls are in a great hurry to grow up, a phenomenon that has been popularly dubbed the Lolita Effect (Durham, 2008).

On the other hand, not many girls engaged in the more overtly sexualized behaviours like wearing a padded bra or make-up or t-shirts with slogans such as “sexy” or “hot,” but some did. Of course, it is not yet clear if any of the behaviours are actually sexualized or self-sexualizing from the girl’s own point of view. However, it seems likely that they do form part of the process of girls’ socialization into a feminine gender role that increasingly contains self-sexualization as a culturally sanctioned and normative component (Murnen & Smolak, 2013). In addition, in presenting (perhaps unwittingly) a somewhat grown up or sexualized appearance, girls may receive attention they neither want nor know how to respond to (Tolman, 2002). Similarly, in reading or viewing media that are too old for them, girls are likely to be exposed to material that they do not fully understand nor evaluate sufficiently critically (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Further, Graff, Murnen, and Smolak (2012) have recently shown that a pre-teen (fifth grade) girl dressed in sexualized clothing was perceived as less intelligent, capable, moral, and self-respecting than the same girl dressed in childlike clothing. The authors conclude that such perceptions might affect girls’ development in ways that limit their life opportunities, in particular, their achievement in domains not related to appearance. It is also pertinent that the single item “playing ‘dress ups’” loaded with the other activities (e.g., reading and crafts) and not with any of the ‘grown up’ behaviours. This suggests that girls are not wearing nail polish, makeup, or high heels as a form of play or ‘dressing up.’

With respect to body image, although girls were very obviously interested in appearance (they commented frequently on their own and others’ appearance), across the whole sample there were relatively fewer who expressed overt concern with their appearance. This did, however, increase significantly with age, such that by 6-7 years of age, 14% were

reported to have expressed concern with their appearance. By 8-10 years of age, 28% had expressed concern with their appearance and 15% with how they look in photographs. So while most girls appeared satisfied with their bodies and overall appearance, over a quarter of 8-10 year-olds were not. This level of appearance concern is both sad and worrying. It can also be taken as a strong indicator that young girls are growing up too quickly, in that they are taking on what were once considered the concerns of older adolescent girls. Further, it seems very likely that as these girls grow older, an increasing proportion of the cohort will begin to display concern with their body image and appearance. Although there is considerable prospective evidence as to the negative consequences of body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls and adult women (e.g., Stice, 2002), as yet there are few data on the longer-term consequences of body concerns beginning at such a young age. One study has shown that appearance dissatisfaction in 5-8 year-old girls predicted a subsequent drop in overall self-esteem one year later (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006b).

In terms of relationships between reported behaviours and appearance concern, the correlational analyses showed that, with the exception of other activities such as reading and crafts, all behavioural factors predicted appearance concern. In the regression analysis, involvement with teen culture, the wearing of beauty accessories such as nail polish or heeled shoes, and attention to clothes emerged as unique predictors. The first of these extends the small amount of previous research that has demonstrated relationships between exposure to appearance-related media (teen magazines, soap operas, music videos) and body image concerns among young preadolescent girls (Anschutz, Engels, Van Leeuwe, & van Strien, 2009; Clark & Tiggemann, 2007; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006b; Sands & Wardle, 2003), parallel to what has been reported for their adolescent counterparts (Levine & Murnen, 2009). The findings concerning beauty accessories and clothes are new. At least in terms of body

image, these behaviours appear to have negative implications. Future research could usefully examine associations with broader aspects of girls' well-being such as global self-esteem.

As predicted, mothers' self-objectification as measured by self-surveillance was related to daughters' involvement in teen culture and other 'grown up' behaviours, as well as to appearance concern. This novel finding suggests that mothers' own focus on appearance is transmitted (advertently or inadvertently) to their daughters. The fact that maternal material concern was also related supports previous suggestions by Dittmar (2008) that body image ideals are interwoven into contemporary consumer culture. It is perhaps not surprising that wanting the latest things is associated with having and doing things that are grown up. However, the present findings do not detail the mechanisms by which maternal characteristics result in particular child behaviours. In particular, we do not know whether maternal attitudes are indirectly absorbed or internalized by children, or whether parents actively drive and encourage certain behaviours, e.g., by buying teen magazines, nail polish, or make up for their daughters. Accordingly, future studies should explicitly assess parental behaviours in the rearing of their daughters. Also of note was the finding that when child age and maternal characteristics were controlled for in the hierarchical regression, only child behaviours remained unique predictors of appearance concern. This suggests that maternal influences are largely mediated by child behaviours.

The study has a number of practical implications. To the extent that involvement with teen culture emerged as a strong predictor of appearance concern, this provides a suitable target for intervention. Parents can take steps to actively encourage age-appropriate activities and to minimize their child's exposure to appearance-focused and sexualized media, for example, by not buying teen magazines for their daughters or allowing them to watch music videos. Recently, Starr and Ferguson (2012) have identified maternal TV mediation (the co-viewing and talking about television programs with their daughters) as protective against

young girls' self-sexualization. Relatedly, media literacy programs which have shown some success in combating negative body image in adolescents (e.g., Levine & Murnen, 2009), might usefully be extended to younger girls so they can become more critically aware of the appearance-related and sexualizing content of media messages. In addition, the images and advertising in teen media likely fuel an interest in clothes and beauty products, the other two unique predictors of appearance concern. Goodin, Van Denburg, Murnen, and Smolak (2011) have recently proposed clothing as an additional way in which girls can be socialized into a sexually objectified role. Their content analysis found evidence for a substantial presence of sexualizing characteristics (e.g., revealingness, emphasis on sexualized body parts) in mainstream clothing readily available for young girls, an aspect that parents (and other purchasers) may not entirely recognise.

In this it is very difficult to know how to advise parents. Most parents want the best for their daughters; for some parents, this likely includes having the latest things. In the open-ended comments at the end of the questionnaire, mothers also reported that despite their best efforts, their daughters often want things that they (the mothers) do not approve of. For example, parents were “very concerned” with the way girls are “encouraged to grow up before they are ready” and a number wrote of trying to “shield” their daughters from sociocultural influences. But they also described how difficult a task this is, in the face of continual advertising, pressure from their own daughters, and pressure from their daughter's friends. There can be no doubt that mothers see raising girls in the contemporary world as “very challenging!”

As in all studies, the present results need to be considered in the light of a number of limitations. First, it was necessary to access child behaviours through mother report as young girls lack the verbal facility to fill in the questionnaire. In particular, it is possible that parental knowledge of their daughters may be somewhat limited for the older girls (9-10

years) in the present sample. Future studies should ask these questions of girls themselves, in addition to employing more objective behavioural observation. Second, the sample was recruited through internet parenting sites, and so the mothers sampled may not have been representative of parents in general. Here they were more highly educated than the general Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) and thus may have been more interested in and attuned to parenting issues. However, this was the most sensible way to obtain the large sample size necessary. Relatedly, the questionnaire needed to be as simple and brief as possible to achieve a large sample size and so presents rather a broad brush. Future studies might include established measures of parental materialism, as well as investigate other relevant constructs, e.g., parenting style or the nature of the parent-child bond, that might provide greater insight into what drives child behaviour. Finally, the study was correlational in design, and hence definite causal statements cannot be made. Future studies that track the development of sexualized behaviour, appearance concern, and other potential psychological consequences of such behaviour, over some time will be required for more definite causal answers.

Despite the above limitations, the present study has made an important start on documenting potentially sexualized behaviours in young girls. In some ways it provides a useful snapshot at a particular point in time into the lives of contemporary 4-10 year old girls. What is very clear is that young girls are adopting many of the behaviours of their older peers. If the focus on appearance demonstrated here becomes their habitual way of viewing themselves, then this is liable to have negative consequences for their well-being as a teenager and as an adult woman. As a society, we have yet to see the consequences of an entire new generation of girls brought up in a highly sexualized environment and increasingly socialized by the mass media.

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Table 1

Percentage of Girls Engaging in the Behaviours (At Least ‘Sometimes’)

	Age group				<i>F</i>
	Total (<i>n</i> = 815)	4-5 yrs (<i>n</i> = 339)	6-7 yrs (<i>n</i> = 209)	8-10 yrs (<i>n</i> = 267)	
Likes to play ‘dress ups’	82.4%	94.9%	86.1%	63.4%	99.16**
Likes play sport or physical activity	94.8%	97.6%	92.8%	92.7%	0.72
Wears shoes with heels	13.1%	12.2%	13.5%	13.8%	0.13
Wears lip gloss	30.8%	25.4%	30.4%	38.2%	13.32**
Wears makeup	10.2%	7.8%	10.6%	13.0%	12.39**
Likes art and craft activities	99.1%	99.7%	99.5%	98.1%	10.12**
Curls or straightens hair	9.5%	5.1%	7.2%	16.9%	29.91**
Dyes her hair	0.5%	0.3%	0.5%	0.8%	0.62
Watches music videos	29.8%	16.6%	35.1%	42.5%	37.48**
Listen to pop music	63.8%	45.9%	66.2%	84.9%	74.85**
Wears a bralette or padded bra	4.8%	0.6%	1.4%	12.8%	36.24**
Likes to dance	95.8%	97.0%	96.2%	94.0%	9.68**
Likes to read or be read to	99.6%	100%	100%	98.9%	13.37**
Removes any body hair	0.7%	0%	0.5%	1.9%	6.73**
Enjoys helping with chores	85.3%	89.6%	86.5%	78.9%	10.46**
Wears nail polish	36.4%	33.9%	37.5%	38.7%	4.41*
Wears deodorant	10.1%	0%	2.4%	28.9%	89.35**
Wears a lot of pink clothes	73.5%	92.2%	79.7%	44.9%	140.90**
Wears clothes slogans ‘hot’, ‘sexy’	2.2%	2.4%	1.0%	3.0%	0.47
Interested in fashion/ what clothes ‘in’	33.3%	14.5%	35.9%	54.9%	85.66**
Interesting in having the latest ‘stuff’	36.5%	19.3%	45.0%	51.7%	74.10**
Enjoys shopping for clothes	80.8%	78.3%	82.7%	82.3%	1.72
Is particular/ ‘fussy’ about what wears	73.5%	73.9%	70.3%	75.6%	1.37
Reads magazines Total Girl, Dolly	10.5%	1.8%	7.2%	24.2%	73.04**
Is interested celebrities (Miley Cyrus)	22.7%	5.3%	21.3%	46.2%	157.82**
Talks about boys in romantic terms	14.9%	7.4%	15.9%	23.9%	35.89**

Note. *F*s based on analysis of mean scores**p* < .05, ***p* < .001

Table 2

Factor Loadings for Child Behaviours

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
	Teen Culture	Other Activities	Beauty Products	Attention to Clothes	Personal Grooming
Watches music videos	.45				
Listen to pop music	.57				
Wears a lot of pink clothes	-.40				
Interesting in having the latest 'stuff'	.65				
Reads magazines Total Girl, Dolly	.47				
Is interested celebrities (Miley Cyrus)	.74				
Talks about boys in romantic terms	.43				
Likes to play 'dress ups'		.39			
Likes art and craft activities		.42			
Likes to dance		.56			
Likes to read or be read to		.44			
Enjoys helping with chores		.45			
Wears shoes with heels			.57		
Wears lip gloss			.67		
Wears makeup			.71		
Curls or straightens hair			.35		
Wears nail polish			.55		
Interested in fashion/ what clothes 'in'	.69			.40	
Enjoys shopping for clothes				.44	
Is particular/ 'fussy' about what wears				.57	
Wears a bralette or padded bra					.62
Removes any body hair					.46
Wears deodorant					.61
Internal reliability (α)	.76	.58	.75	.60	.56
Mean inter-item correlation	.32	.22	.37	.34	.35

Note. Factor loadings > .32 listed

Table 3

Percentage of Girls Engaging in Appearance Concern (At Least 'Sometimes')

	Age group				
	Total (<i>n</i> = 815)	4-5 yrs (<i>n</i> = 339)	6-7 yrs (<i>n</i> = 209)	8-10 yrs (<i>n</i> = 267)	<i>F</i>
Appears satisfied/comfortable body	97.2%	97.3%	99.5%	95.1%	28.50**
Asks for feedback on her appearance	55.2%	56.0%	52.4%	56.4%	0.03
Makes comments on own appearance	58.0%	67.4%	54.5%	48.9%	12.19**
Makes comments appearance others	54.0%	51.6%	55.3%	56.0%	0.45
Expresses concern re appearance	14.6%	4.7%	13.9%	27.8%	51.19**
Examines appearance in mirror	69.0%	62.4%	71.5%	75.5%	5.98*
Expresses concern looks in photos	7.2%	2.4%	4.8%	15.1%	55.53**

Note. *F*s based on analysis of mean scores

p* < .05, *p* < .001

Table 4

Correlations Between Child Behaviours and Appearance Concern

	Child Behaviours				
	Teen Culture	Other Activities	Beauty Products	Attention to Clothes	Personal Grooming
Teen Culture	--	-.21**	.42**	.40**	.41**
Other Activities		--	.05	.08	-.25**
Beauty Products				.34**	.29**
Attention to Clothes					.16**
Appearance Concern	.40**	.08	.36**	.51**	.18**

Note. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

Table 5

Correlations Between Maternal Attributes and Child Behaviours and Appearance Concern

	Maternal Attributes				
	Age	BMI	Self-Objectification	Self-Surveillance	Material Concern
Teen Culture	.15**	.09	.09	.10*	.15**
Other Activities	-.14**	.04	-.01	.08	.01
Beauty Products	-.01	.07	.05	.10*	.20**
Attention to Clothes	.07	.00	.05	.09	.16**
Personal Grooming	.09	.11*	-.04	-.01	.08
Appearance Concern	.06	.02	.07	.12**	.14**

Note. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

Table 6

Hierarchical Regression Analysis to Predict Appearance Concern

Predictor	β	t	p	sr^2
Step 1				
Age (child)	.19	5.07	< .001	.033
$R^2_{\text{change}} = .034, F_{\text{change}}(1,741) = 25.75, p < .001$				
Step 2				
Age (child)	.19	4.95	< .001	.031
Maternal age	.01	0.37	.713	.000
Maternal self-objectification	.03	0.73	.463	.000
Maternal self-surveillance	.11	2.57	.010	.008
Maternal material concern	.09	2.39	.017	.007
$R^2_{\text{change}} = .028, F_{\text{change}}(4,737) = 5.47, p < .001$				
Step 3				
Age (child)	-.08	-1.66	.098	.003
Maternal age	.03	0.81	.417	.000
Maternal self-objectification	-.00	-0.10	.923	.000
Maternal self-surveillance	.05	1.49	.136	.000
Maternal material concern	-.01	-0.16	.871	.000
Teen culture	.25	5.41	< .001	.027
Other activities	.07	2.06	.040	.004
Beauty products	.11	3.21	.001	.010
Attention to clothes	.35	10.07	< .001	.095
Personal grooming	.05	1.25	.211	.000
$R^2_{\text{change}} = .255, F_{\text{change}}(5,732) = 54.60, p < .001$				